

Regulatory case report for the University of Northampton – finding of breaches of conditions B1, B2 and B4

Summary

This case report explains the regulatory judgement of the Office for Students (OfS) regarding a quality assessment of the University of Northampton’s computing courses, and its compliance with ongoing conditions of registration B1, B2 and B4. These conditions set out the OfS’s requirements relating to the quality of the provider’s courses. In this case report, we explain why we have decided that the provider breached these conditions.

Background

The OfS requires all registered higher education providers’ courses to meet conditions that relate to quality and standards. The detailed requirements of these conditions can be found in the OfS’s regulatory framework.¹

As a result of our general monitoring, in January 2023 we decided to open an investigation into the quality of computing courses provided by the University of Northampton (‘the provider’). We appointed an assessment team on 12 January 2023 that consisted of three academic expert assessors and a member of OfS staff. The team was asked to give its advice and judgements about the quality of the provider’s computing courses.

The assessment team conducted the quality assessment between January and June 2023. The quality assessment report setting out the advice and judgements of the assessment team was published by the OfS on 30 July 2024.² Through its activities, the team identified seven areas of concern that may have related to the University of Northampton’s compliance with the OfS’s conditions of registration:

- **Concern 1:** The assessment team concluded that the course delivery model was not effective for the nature of the undergraduate computing student cohort. This concern relates to condition of registration B1 because the assessment team considered that the provider was not ensuring that students registered on its computing courses received a high quality academic experience.
- **Concern 2:** The assessment team found that the quality of information available to computing students about assessment was limited; it was not clear or consistent. This concern relates to condition of registration B1 because, in the view of the assessment

¹ Available at OfS, [Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#).

² See OfS, [Quality assessment report: Computing courses at University of Northampton](#).

team, the provider was not ensuring that students registered on its computing courses received a high quality academic experience.

- **Concern 3:** The assessment team found that there was limited access to resources that would support games students' independent learning. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because the assessment team considered that games students were not consistently receiving resources sufficient for them to succeed in and beyond higher education.
- **Concern 4:** The assessment team was of the view that computing students had insufficient access to specialist learning resources. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because, in the view of the assessment team, computing students were not consistently receiving resources sufficient for them to succeed in and beyond higher education.
- **Concern 5:** The assessment team concluded that there was limited academic learning support for computing students. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because the assessment team was of the view that computing students were not consistently receiving support sufficient for them to succeed in and beyond higher education.
- **Concern 6:** The assessment team found that ineffective systems and processes impacted the effectiveness of academic support for computing students. This concern relates to condition of registration B2 because the assessment considered that computing students were not consistently receiving support sufficient for them to succeed in and beyond higher education.
- **Concern 7:** The assessment team concluded that assessment information and feedback was insufficient to enable all computing students to use it effectively to inform the development of their work. This concern relates to condition of registration B4 because the assessment team considered that the provider was not ensuring that students were assessed effectively.

Following the assessment process, we engaged with the provider to understand its views on the concerns of the assessment team. As part of this engagement, the provider explained the progress it had made in relation to the concerns set out in the assessment report since the initial assessment had concluded. We carefully considered the content of the quality assessment report, and the information given by the provider during the engagement. We decided that the provider was in breach of conditions B1, B2 and B4 at the time of the assessment. This case report sets out the reasons for these decisions.

Relevant OfS conditions of registration and OfS regulatory findings

Our view is that the concerns raised by the assessment team demonstrate breaches of conditions B1, B2 and B4. Our engagement with the provider following the conclusion of the assessment shows that, while the provider has taken actions to address the concerns, there is continuing regulatory risk.

Condition B1

This condition requires a provider to ensure that students 'receive a high quality academic experience', which includes but is not limited to ensuring that 'each higher education course is effectively delivered'.

OfS judgement on condition B1

We have judged that the University of Northampton has breached condition B1. We consider that the evidence gathered by the assessment team, and presented in its report, demonstrates that the provider had not ensured that its computing courses were effectively delivered.

In concern 2 of the quality assessment report, the assessment team identified concerns relating to the quality of information available to students about assessment. Issues identified by the assessment team in this concern included the complexity of the provider's grading system, the quality of the provider's marking rubrics, a lack of alignment and inconsistencies across different sources of information on assessment, and inaccuracies in assessment information.

We have concluded that these matters are relevant to the provider's compliance with condition B1 because some of the assessment information provided to computing students was overly complicated, unclear or contained errors. As a result, elements of the provider's course delivery were not effective, because information that would enable students to understand how to meet learning outcomes and perform well on their courses was inadequate. The quality of assessment information was insufficient to ensure that students were in receipt of a high quality academic experience. Accordingly, it is our judgement that the provider was in breach of condition B1 at the time of the assessment.

The assessment team also identified a concern that the delivery model used by the provider was not effective for the nature of the undergraduate computing student cohort. Concern 1 in the quality assessment report primarily focuses on the provider's move to a 'semesterised' delivery model for its undergraduate students. The report sets out the assessment team's views that this switch led to an increased pace of delivery, lengthy teaching sessions, a high volume of summative assessment in each period, and bunching of assessment hand-in dates. The assessment team concluded that these features of the delivery model were not suited to the nature of the student cohort that the provider had recruited.

The evidence we reviewed that relates to concern 1 demonstrates that the assessment team identified legitimate concerns with the effectiveness of the provider's delivery model, and this indicates that the provider was at increased risk of non-compliance with condition B1 at the time of the assessment. Due to our finding, relating to concern 2, that the provider was in breach of condition B1 at the time of the assessment, we have not made any additional findings in relation to this concern. However, when considering the most appropriate regulatory intervention in response to the identified breach of condition B1, we have also considered the additional areas of regulatory risk identified that relate to concern 1.

Condition B2

One requirement of this condition is that a provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that students receive 'resources and support which are sufficient for the purpose of ensuring a high quality academic experience for those students, and those students succeed in and beyond higher education'.

Resources include, but are not limited to, 'physical and digital learning resources that are adequate and deployed effectively to meet the needs of the cohort of students'. Support means 'the effective deployment of assistance, as appropriate to the content of the higher education course and the cohort of students, including but not limited to academic support relating to the content of the higher education course'.

OfS judgement on condition B2

We have judged that the University of Northampton has breached condition B2. We consider that the assessment team's conclusions demonstrate that the provider had not taken all reasonable steps to ensure that computing students received resources and support sufficient for the purpose of ensuring a high quality academic experience for those students, and those students succeed in and beyond higher education.

In concern 3, the assessment team identified concerns relating to access to resources for computing students studying games courses. The assessment team noted that games students required higher specification computers than general computing students. In the quality assessment report, the assessment team stated that the way that teaching space is used on campus restricted access to such computers, which were needed by games students to support their independent learning. The assessment team also concluded that the provider had not provided games students with sufficient alternatives to the use of computers on campus.

We consider these matters to be relevant to the provider's compliance with condition B2. This is because, at the time of the assessment, there were steps the provider was not taking to ensure that games students received sufficient learning resources (in this case, computers of an appropriate specification), and that this had a negative impact on the academic experience of games students.

The assessment team also identified issues with the provision of resources to the provider's computing students more widely. In concern 4, the assessment team concluded that computing students had insufficient access to specialist learning resources. This was because, in the view of the assessment team, there were instances where computing students had limited access to software required for their study because of policies relating to cyber security that the provider had adopted.

Our view is that the matters identified in concern 4 are also relevant to the provider's compliance with condition B2. This is because, at the time of the assessment, there were steps the provider was not taking to ensure that computing students received sufficient resources (in this case, computer software). The evidence indicates that the academic experience of computing students was negatively affected, as was their ability to succeed on their courses.

In concern 6, the assessment team found that ineffective systems and processes had negatively impacted the effectiveness of academic support for computing students. The main focus of this concern related to the provider's tracking of students' engagement with their personal academic tutors. The assessment team identified a lack of engagement data held by the provider, and identified this as a concern due to the role of personal academic tutoring in referring students to, or raising their awareness of, other forms of support, as part of the provider's integrated student support model.

It is our view that the matters identified in concern 6 are relevant to the provider's compliance with condition B2. This is because, at the time of the assessment, there were steps the provider was not taking to ensure that computing students received sufficient support. Specifically, it would have been reasonable to expect the provider to have a robust mechanism for tracking student engagement with their personal academic tutors, due to the central role played by the tutoring process in identifying and fulfilling student support needs.

We have concluded – following our consideration of concerns 3, 4 and 6 as set out above – that the provider was not taking all reasonable steps to ensure that its cohort of students registered on each of its computing courses received resources and support sufficient for the purpose of ensuring a high quality academic experience for those students, or for the purpose of ensuring that those students succeed in and beyond higher education. For these reasons, we have judged that the provider was in breach of condition B2 at the time of the assessment.

The assessment team also identified a concern that there was limited academic learning support for computing students. In concern 5, the quality assessment report focuses on the resourcing of relevant teams, and relationships between different staff teams at the provider, and the associated effects on the availability of academic support for students.

We have concluded that the evidence contained within concern 5 of the quality assessment report demonstrates that there was a legitimate concern identified with the uptake of academic support among computing students at the provider. We consider that this indicates that the provider was at increased risk of non-compliance with condition B2 at the time of the assessment. Due to our finding, relating to concerns 3, 4 and 6, that the provider was in breach of condition B2 at the time of the assessment, the OfS has not made any additional findings in relation to concern 5. However, when considering the most appropriate regulatory intervention in response to the identified breach of condition B2, we have also considered the additional areas of regulatory risk identified relating to concern 5.

Condition B4

One requirement of condition B4 is that a provider must ensure that students are assessed effectively.

OfS judgement on condition B4

We have judged that the University of Northampton has breached condition B4. We consider that the evidence gathered by the assessment team and presented in the quality assessment report demonstrates that the provider had not ensured that its computing students were assessed effectively.

The assessment team identified in concern 7 that assessment information and feedback was insufficient to enable all students to use it effectively to inform the development of their work. In this concern, the assessment team concluded that the quality of written feedback on summative assessment was insufficient to support students' performance on their future assessments. The assessment team identified instances where feedback was given in a form that would not be easily accessible to some students, and instances where written feedback did not align with the provider's grading system when describing student performance.

We have concluded that these matters are relevant to the provider's compliance with condition B4 because summative feedback provided to computing students lacked clarity and had the potential

to cause confusion. This meant that it was not effective in supporting students to inform their future work and, as a result, students were not always assessed effectively. It is our judgement that the provider was in breach of condition B4 at the time of the assessment.

Actions since the publication of the OfS's quality assessment report

During the quality assessment, the University of Northampton engaged positively with the OfS, and informed the assessment team of several plans and actions that it was implementing that were relevant to the concerns identified in the quality assessment report. At this time, the assessment team was of the view that, while the plans identified by the provider were appropriate, a judgement on their effectiveness was not possible as they were not yet sufficiently progressed to be able to demonstrate improvements.

We have continued to engage with the provider since the assessment, and it has provided further information about the actions that it has taken, and continues to take, in response to the concerns identified in the report.

Examples taken by the provider that are relevant to the provider's compliance with **condition B1** include:

- the introduction of a new numeric grading system
- the standardisation of assessment briefs, and changes to the monitoring and moderation of these briefs
- additional staff development activities related to clarity of assessment materials.

Relevant to the provider's compliance with **condition B2**, the provider has:

- invested significantly in additional IT resources, including additional labs, computers and software
- made changes to the way it timetables computing rooms in order to increase the availability of resources for games students
- amended personal academic tutoring processes, including changes to allocation and, monitoring, and the introduction of further staff training.

With regards to the issues relevant to the provider's compliance with **condition B4**, the provider has:

- made amendments to its academic regulations, and to its student-facing policies in order to support timely feedback
- increased training and support for staff relating to providing feedback
- enhanced its oversight of feedback on assessment.

We have considered these actions as part of our assessment of compliance, and when considering the appropriateness of our intervention. It is our view that the actions taken by the provider in relation to the quality of information about assessment have addressed the issues identified in concern 2 of the quality assessment report, and have remedied the breach of condition B1. It is

also our view that the provider has taken sufficient actions to address the issues set out in concern 3 of the quality assessment report, relating to the availability of resources for games students, which in part led to our finding that the provider had breached condition B2.

It is our view that the provider's plans in other areas are relevant to the concerns identified, and we acknowledge that the provider has taken positive steps in these areas since the time of the assessment. However, we do not consider that the information supplied by the provider to date has given sufficient reassurance that it has taken appropriate actions to address all aspects of the concerns that have led to our findings of breaches of conditions B2 and B4, or demonstrated the impact that its actions are having on the experiences of computing students.

We have determined that, due to the seriousness of our concerns, it is appropriate that the provider identifies and takes further actions. We have also concluded that it is important that the OfS has a role in not only monitoring the implementation of the provider's plans, but also in ensuring the provider demonstrates the positive impacts that these actions are having on its performance.

Regulatory intervention

In considering our regulatory response following these findings, we have:

- weighed up the **relevant intervention factors** and the **OfS's general duties**³
- considered the **scale and impact** of these breaches; due to the nature of the concerns, a large number of students could potentially have been disadvantaged by the issues set out in the assessment report
- placed weight on **the actions taken by the provider** since the time of the assessment, including our view that the provider has not yet given sufficient reassurance that all of the concerns identified in the quality assessment report have been adequately addressed.

When considering how we could best address the breach of conditions, we looked at what the most appropriate, effective intervention would be to deliver the intended outcome for students. While more significant interventions were an option, we have decided to impose two specific ongoing conditions of registration on the provider, with each aligned to an identified area of non-compliance with the B conditions. We judged that this would be most effective intervention available to us, and that it is likely to encourage targeted action by the provider to improve the assessment information, feedback, and resources and support that computing students receive.

When coming to this judgement, we were conscious that we should not impose an intervention that is any more burdensome for the provider than necessary, while remaining effective. The specific ongoing conditions are designed to allow the provider to demonstrate ongoing improvements to both the OfS, and to its students.

The terms of the specific ongoing conditions of registration require the provider to identify and take further improvement actions to address the concerns in the quality assessment report that have led to the breaches of conditions B2 and B4. The terms of the specific conditions include:

³ See OfS regulatory framework, [PART I – The OfS's risk-based approach](#).

- Actions relevant to the provider's compliance with **condition B2** include improvements to the consistency of access to software for computing students. The provider is also required to enhance the availability of data relating to student engagement with academic support.
- The provider will also be required to improve the clarity of written feedback on assessment, a requirement relevant to compliance with **condition B4**.

We also set requirements on the provider to demonstrate to the OfS that the areas of increased risk we have identified following our consideration of the quality assessment report that did not result in the finding of a breach are effectively mitigated.

We will then use the intelligence available to us, including the provider's reports, to determine the scope of a further assessment of the quality of the provider's computing courses, before coming to an updated view on the provider's compliance with general ongoing conditions of registration B1, B2 and B4. In the event that we find further instances of non-compliance with the conditions of registration, we will consider taking further regulatory action.

The text below constitutes the specific ongoing conditions imposed on the University of Northampton, pursuant to section 6(1) of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.⁴ These are referred to as 'Specific Ongoing Condition B2A (University of Northampton)', and 'Specific Ongoing Condition B4A (University of Northampton)'.

⁴ See GOV.UK, [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#).

The University of Northampton: Specific ongoing conditions of registration – conditions B2A and B4A

The University of Northampton (the provider) became registered by the Office for Students (OfS) on 8 October 2018.

The OfS opened an investigation into the quality of **computing courses** at the provider in December 2022. The investigation was limited to lines of enquiry that were within the scope of ongoing conditions of registration B1, B2 and B4. The outcome of the assessment process is that the OfS has deemed that the provider has breached ongoing conditions of registration B1, B2 and B4.⁵

The University of Northampton: Specific ongoing condition B2A

Further to the assessment into the quality of computing courses, the OfS has deemed that the provider has breached condition B2, and has identified further areas of regulatory risk. The OfS has therefore imposed requirements to ensure that the interests of current and future students, and the interests of the taxpayer, are protected.

The reason for the specific condition is that the investigation has established the following:

- the provider did not take all reasonable steps to ensure that each cohort of students registered on each computing course received resources and support which are sufficient for the purpose of ensuring:
 - a high quality academic experience for those students (as required by condition B2.2.a.i); and
 - those students succeed in and beyond higher education (as required by condition B2.2.a.ii).

To ensure that the breach is effectively remedied and to mitigate future risk, the OfS has imposed specific ongoing condition of registration B2A. The specific condition sets out actions that the provider must take to provide assurance that compliance with general ongoing condition of registration B2 is met and maintained.

Specific ongoing condition B2A – Notice of requirements

B2A.1 The provider must identify and take actions that result in improvements to resources and support for students studying **computing courses**. Specifically, this condition requires the provider to make and demonstrate such improvements to:

- IT support that enables consistency of access to software required by computing students in their learning;

⁵ [Link to regulatory case report]

- the availability of data relating to student engagement with Personal Academic Tutoring, and academic support more widely.

Requirement B2A.1 has been imposed to ensure that the breach of condition B2 is remedied.

B2A.2 The provider must also ensure that it is taking all reasonable steps to ensure that academic support for students studying **computing courses** is sufficient for ensuring that those students receive a high quality academic experience, and that they succeed in and beyond higher education. Specifically, this condition requires the provider to demonstrate to the OfS that:

- provision of academic support is appropriately resourced relative to the size and nature of the provider's cohort of computing students; and
- the provider's systems and processes enable students with additional needs to be sufficiently supported.

Requirement B2A.2 has been imposed to ensure that the further areas of regulatory risk identified by the OfS following the quality assessment are mitigated.

B2A.3 The provider must keep complete and accurate records of the actions taken in accordance with **B2A.1** and **B2A.2** until the OfS has completed its assessment of compliance set out in **B2A.7** below. Any such records must be provided to the OfS on request.

B2A.4 The provider's compliance with this condition does not in any way affect the ability of the OfS to take regulatory or enforcement action in respect of the provider's compliance with any other condition of registration, including (but not limited to) ongoing condition B2.

Timing, reporting and monitoring

B2A.5 No later than 1700 on 29 October 2026, the provider must submit to the OfS:

- details of the actions that it has identified, and a short update of progress pertaining to the requirements of **B2A.1**; and
- a short summary of measures that the provider has taken pertaining to the requirements of **B2A.2**.

These are required to enable the OfS to understand how progress is being made towards ensuring compliance with ongoing condition B2, and to understand how the provider will ensure that future risks are mitigated.

B2A.6 No later than 1700 on 29 April 2027, the provider must submit to the OfS:

- a full update of progress pertaining to the requirements of **B2A.1**; and
- an updated summary of measures that the provider has taken pertaining to the requirements of **B2A.2**.

B2A.7 No later than 29 April 2027, the provider must be ready to comply with a quality assessment of its **computing courses**. The timing and scope of the quality assessment will be determined by the OfS at the time, with the scope to be informed by relevant intelligence available to the OfS.

B2A.8 If, following this assessment, the OfS judges that the provider is in breach of, or is at increased risk of breach of, ongoing condition B2, the OfS reserves the right to take further regulatory action.

Specific ongoing condition B2A – Definitions

Computing courses means any higher education course wholly or partly included in the computing subject area at level 2 of the **Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH)** which is provided in any manner or form by the Provider, excluding transnational education courses and any elements of a course which are provided by a delivery partner under a partnership arrangement.

Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) means the standardised hierarchical aggregation (grouping) of subject codes and terms, developed by HESA.⁶

Higher education course is to be interpreted on the basis set out in general ongoing condition B2.

The University of Northampton: Specific ongoing condition B4A

Further to the assessment into the quality of computing courses, the OfS has deemed that the provider has breached condition B4. The OfS has therefore imposed requirements to ensure that the interests of current and future students, and the interests of the taxpayer, are protected.

The reason for the specific condition is that the investigation has established the following:

- the provider did not ensure that students on computing courses were assessed effectively (as required by condition B4.2.a).

To ensure that the breach is effectively remedied and to mitigate future risk, the OfS has imposed specific ongoing condition of registration B4A. The specific condition sets out actions that the provider must take to provide assurance that compliance with general ongoing condition of registration B4 is met and maintained.

Specific ongoing condition B4A – Notice of requirements

B4A.1 The provider must take actions that result in improvements to feedback on assessment for **computing courses**, to ensure that students studying these courses are assessed effectively. In identifying these actions, the provider must have regard to improving:

- the clarity of written feedback on assessment, and use of accessible language; and
- the alignment of written feedback with provider's mark criteria.

Requirement B4A.1 has been imposed to ensure that the breach of condition B4 is remedied.

⁶ Further information is available at HESA, [CAH](#).

B4A.2 The provider must keep complete and accurate records of the actions taken in accordance with **B4A.1** until the OfS has completed its assessment of compliance set out in **B4A.6** below. Any such records must be provided to the OfS on request.

B4A.3 The provider's compliance with this condition does not in any way affect the ability of the OfS to take regulatory or enforcement action in respect of the provider's compliance with any other condition of registration, including (but not limited to) ongoing condition B4.

Timing, reporting and monitoring

B4A.4 No later than 1700 on 29 October 2026, the provider must submit to the OfS:

- details of the actions that it has identified, and a short update of progress pertaining to the requirements of **B4A.1**.

This is required to enable the OfS to understand how progress is being made towards ensuring compliance with ongoing condition B2, and to understand how the provider will ensure that future risks are mitigated.

B4A.5 No later than 1700 on 29 April 2027, the provider must submit to the OfS:

- A full update of progress pertaining to the requirements of **B4A.1**.

B2A.6 No later than 29 April 2027, the provider must be ready to comply with a quality assessment of its **computing courses**. The timing and scope of the quality assessment will be determined by the OfS at the time, with the scope to be informed by relevant intelligence available to the OfS.

B2A.7 If, following this assessment, the OfS judges that the provider is in breach of, or is at increased risk of breach of, ongoing condition B4, the OfS reserves the right to take further regulatory action.

Specific ongoing condition B4A – Definitions

Computing courses means any higher education course wholly or partly included in the computing subject area at level 2 of the **Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH)** which is provided in any manner or form by the provider, excluding transnational education courses and any elements of a course which are provided by a delivery partner under a partnership arrangement.

Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) means the standardised hierarchical aggregation (grouping) of subject codes and terms, developed by HESA.⁷

Higher education course is to be interpreted on the basis set out in general ongoing condition B4.

⁷ Further information is available at HESA, [CAH](#).